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British Tax Agents Raid Museum in Search of Putin's Faberge Egg, Report Says

By Anna Dolgov

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Russia's President Vladimir Putin speaks during a commemoration of the Hermitage's 250th anniversary at the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg on Dec. 8, 2014.

The Faberge egg that President Vladimir Putin gave to the Hermitage Museum might have been bought in violation of EU tax regulations, according to an investigation by the British authorities, a news report said.

British and German tax agents raided a Russian-owned Faberge museum in Germany's Baden-Baden shortly before Putin offered the Rothschild Faberge clock egg at a ceremony this week, Britain's The Times reported Thursday.

Baden-Baden museum director Sergei Avtonoshkin said investigators were specifically looking for the Rothschild egg, The Times reported.

The founder of the Baden-Baden museum, Russian billionaire and art collector Alexander Ivanov, said there was a "certain connection" between the raid and the Hermitage ceremony marking the 250th anniversary of the St. Petersburg museum.

Ivanov accused Britain of having staged the raid to thwart Putin's plans to present the egg to the Hermitage, according to the report. But by the time investigators arrived at Baden-Baden on Dec. 1, the egg had apparently already left for Russia.

The Russian billionaire bought the egg at a 2007 Christie's auction in London for 8.9 million pounds ($14 million), The Times reported.

Ivanov has reportedly claimed he then had the egg shipped to Russia — which would exempt the purchase from EU tax — but investigators suspect it was first transported to Germany, according to the report.

When investigators raided the museum, Avtonoshkin, the director, told them that the egg had been loaned to Baden-Baden briefly for an exhibition and then sent back to Moscow, The Times quoted him as saying.

Russia's World Cup Bid

The raid comes on the heels of another allegation last month, linking Russia to supposedly shady art deals.

Britain's 2018 World Cup bid committee earlier accused Putin of having dispatched loyal oligarchs on "deniable" missions to offer artworks in exchange for votes in favor of Russia's bid, the Sunday Times reported in late November.

The artworks in question supposedly included a Pablo Picasso painting offered to UEFA president Michel Platini, and an additional landscape painting to FIFA voting member Michel D'Hooghe of Belgium, according to the report. The missions supposedly took place before 2012, when Putin was Russia's prime minister.

Platini denied the claims as "total fabrications," according to the report. But D'Hooghe — who is reportedly under investigation along with four others by world football body FIFA in a new corruption probe related to the World Cup bids, according to the Washington Post — confirmed having received the landscape painting.

D'Hooghe said he found the painting "absolutely ugly" and had expected it to have no monetary value, the Sunday Times reported. He also said he did not vote for Russia's 2018 bid, according to the report.

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